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ABSTRACT

This article reviews literature on peer acceptance of children and briefly discusses a study of the social skill correlates of peer acceptance. The importance of being able to form friendships for the child's later development and the importance of programs which maximize this ability are noted. There is a review of literature on programs which attempt to promote children's social relations by improving the social skills correlated with sociometric measures of social competence. The issue of deciding precisely which skills should be taught is discussed briefly. The problems of finding observable measures of social skills are explained. A method of studying social skills is proposed in which hypothetical social situations are presented to children (in pictures and stories) and the children are asked how they would deal with those situations. A study is described in which 65 high- and low-popularity kindergarteners were individually shown nine hypothetical situations. It was found that unpopular children were more likely to suggest physically aggressive responses, and were less resourceful than popular children. Additional analysis revealed that although the two groups did not differ in the assertiveness of responses, popular children's responses were rated as significantly more relationship-enhancing and more effective. The use of these strategies in social skill training programs is discussed. Three examples of the hypothetical situations are appended. (Author/BH)

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# Peer Acceptance and Social Skill Training: The Selection of Program Content

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Peer Acceptance and Social Skill Training:

The Selection of Program Content

Efforts have been made recently to teach friendship-making skills to children who are relatively isolated from their peers (e.g., Gottman, Gonso, & Schuler, 1976; Oden & Asher, 1977). These efforts have been based on the assumption that friendships serve important functions in children's lives and that children who are without friends may be at risk in terms of their later development. These assumptions have been supported by a variety of investigations (see Hartup, 1978, and Asher, 1978, for more detailed reviews). For example, friends provide children with emotional security in novel situations, facilitate quite complex forms of imaginary play, and serve important instructional and norms setting functions. Furthermore, children who are without friends are more likely to evidence a variety of social adjustment problems in later life.

Much of the intervention research on children's friendships has used sociometric status as a general index of a child's social competence with peers. Sociometric status has much to recommend it as a measure of social competence. First, it is a highly reliable measure. The test-retest reliability of sociometric scores isn't much different from the reliability of achievement test scores (Bonney, 1943; Hymel & Asher, 1977; Oden & Asher, 1977). Even preschool children evidence stable scores when a rating scale measure rather than the traditional nomination sociometric measure is employed (Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, & Hymel, in press; see Table 1).

Second, sociometric measures are predictive of later life adjustment as variously assessed by mental health records (Cowen, Pederson, Babijian,

Izzo, & Trost, 1973), juvenile delinquency records (Roff, Sells, & Golden, 1972) and high school dropout rates (Ullmann, 1957). In what is perhaps the most impressive long-term prediction study, Cowen et al. (1973) found that sociometric measures taken in third grade predicted later mental health status better than a host of other measures including absenteeism from school, teacher ratings, grade point average, IQ, school nurse referrals, self-concept scores, and anxiety scores.

The attempt to improve children's relations with peers then is not just well-intentioned, but is based on data suggesting the importance of children's early peer relations. However, critical questions remain to be answered. One is what teaching methods are to be employed to help socially isolated children. This issue has been examined in two recent reviews (Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1977; Combs & Slaby, 1978) and is the focus of the paper in this symposium by Furman, Binger, and Rosen. Another critical issue, one that concerns us here, is the particular social skills that should be taught to children who are isolated from peers. This is a fundamental question since no teaching method, no matter how effective, will succeed unless relevant social skills are taught.

Various approaches to selecting program content exist. Perhaps the most common approach to promoting social development has been to teach skills that on an intuitive basis would seem to be important. Much of the "affective curricula" used in schools are based on this intuitive or common sense approach to skill selection. A quite different approach is to teach skills which have been found to correlate with a known criterion of social competence, such as sociometric status. This competence-correlates approach

to the selection of program content was used by Oden and Asher (1977) in a coaching study with socially isolated children. The social skills chosen were those found in previous research to correlate with sociometric status. Four categories of social skill were selected: participation (playing with others, paying attention), cooperation (taking turns, sharing materials), communication (talking with the other person, listening), and validation-support (offering help or encouragement). Oden and Asher created a six-session program in which children were first instructed in these concepts, given opportunities to practice them with peers, and then given opportunities to review the concepts in light of the peer-practice sessions. Children who were coached in these concepts gained more than children who received only peer practice or children who were in a control condition. Furthermore, these gains were maintained at one-year follow-up (see Figure 1). This evidence of long-term maintenance contrasts with the lack of maintenance obtained in interventions which do not directly train social skills (e.g., Lilly, 1971; Rucker & Vincenzo, 1970).

These findings suggest that the coaching program included relevant skills since children instructed in the skills made gains in sociometric status. Still the experiment provided no direct evidence that the sample of unpopular children in this study were deficient in social skills prior to training or evidence about the particular skills that developed as a result of training.

The problem of directly measuring children's social skills is complex. The most common strategy in literature on the social skill correlates of sociometric status involves direct behavioral observation. This approach has a long tradition including Lippitt (1941) in the 1940's, Marshall and

McCandless (1957) in the 1950's and Hartup and Gottman and their colleagues in the 1960's and 1970's (e.g., Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen, 1975; Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967). In all, there are perhaps 15 of such studies that have been published. A review of them (Asher & Hymel, in preparation) suggests a mixed picture. Although a few studies present compelling correlations, many of the studies find modest correlations between observed behavior and sociometric status. In general, the strongest relationships are between observed negative behavior and sociometric rejection (i.e., number of negative nominations received). The correlates of acceptance (i.e., positive nominations received) are scattered and generally low. Furthermore, the relationships between observed behavior and sociometric status tend to be stronger in studies done with preschool children than with elementary school children.

There are a number of factors that could account for the modest relationship between observed behavior and sociometric status. One reason is that sociometric status is affected by non-behavioral characteristics such as race, sex, physical attractiveness, and seemingly even the attractiveness of children's names (see Asher, Oden, & Gottman, 1977, for a review of this literature). However, a more important reason, we believe, has to do with the inherent limitations of behavioral observation methodology when studying individual differences. First, its likely that many of the behaviors that lead children to be liked (e.g., coming to the aid of a classmate, generosity) or disliked (e.g., aggression, cheating) are low-frequency events. Unless one spends many hours watching each child, certain behaviors may not be observed. Second, the classroom, particularly the more highly structured world of the elementary school classroom, often isn't the setting where

important relationship-forming activities take place. Third, the behaviors that lead children to be liked or disliked probably become increasingly diverse as children grow older. Behavioral coding schemes to date have focused on relatively global behaviors and are not well-tuned to the dimensions likely to influence older children's responses to one another. It is not easy to code psychologically important variables such as sense of humor, trustworthiness, or conceit.

Accordingly, other methods of assessing social skillfulness are needed to supplement direct observation measures. In particular, there is a need for assessment of children's conceptions about social behavior in a variety of social situations. The coaching procedure is a cognitively-based intervention. Accordingly, we should be assessing the social-cognitive deficits of socially isolated children as well as assessing their behavioral style. Neither sociometric or behavioral observation measures tell us what the child is thinking. Clearly, we are not the first to suggest the need for social-cognitive assessment. However, the methods used previously have not been very successful in discriminating between popular and unpopular children. Most likely this is because previous measures have been based on globally defined constructs such as role taking and have not examined the more specific strategies that are required in specific social situations.

We set out to design a social-cognitive assessment procedure that is closely tied to specific situations and events. The method we are developing uses hypothetical social situations to study children's ideas on how to respond to a variety of interpersonal problem situations. The hypothetical situations technique was used recently by Ladd and Oden (in press)

to study children's ideas about helpfulness. Children were shown stories with pictures; the characters in the story were portrayed as needing help and the subject was asked what he or she would do to help. Ladd and Oden found that children who had highly unusual ideas about how to help were more likely to be of low sociometric status. We built upon this research by extending the range of situations and analyzing in more detail the content of popular and unpopular children's ideas.

One of our studies using this technique is with 65 high- and low-popular kindergarteners. Children were individually shown nine hypothetical situations. The purpose was to survey a wide variety of situations, many of which may be low-frequency events yet important to gaining friends. Each of our nine items or story situations were presented to the child along with a picture. There were two versions of each story and picture, identical except for the sex of the characters. Children were shown one item at a time and asked to say what the protagonist could do. Children were then encouraged to give a second response, and if possible, additional responses.

In general, there were three types of items. One type is concerned with the problem of getting to know a new group of children or making a new friend. Figure 2 shows an item of this sort. A second type of item is concerned with the management of conflict such as how to respond when another child tries to take away a toy (see Figure 3 for an example). The third type of item involves maintenance situations such as how to help a friend or how to maintain a conversation (see Figure 4).

Our task was to classify the strategies that children use for each item. Accordingly, we created categories to describe the different kinds of responses children gave. Our goal was to make reasonable but not "picky" distinctions

among the responses. The number of categories need to capture children's ideas varied across items from 10 to 25, with an average of about 16. Once categories were created we had two judges independently sort responses into categories. Interjudge agreement was high.

We are interested, of course, in whether popular and unpopular children differ in the strategies they suggest. The pattern is a complex one. On the one hand, examination of the three most commonly given responses for each item indicates a fair amount of similarity across groups. About two-thirds of the most common responses of popular children were given by unpopular children. Thus it is clear that the two groups of children are members of the same culture, so to speak.

On the other hand interesting differences exist. First, unpopular children are much more likely to use an aggressive strategy particularly on the conflict items. For example, on the item where the child tries to take away the toy twelve percent of unpopular children's responses were categorized as physical aggression (e.g., "punch him"; "she could beat her up"). Only two percent of popular children's responses were physically aggressive.

Another difference occurs in items where there is little conflict and aggression would be an unlikely response. Here unpopular children are characterized by a certain lack of resourcefulness. First, they are more likely to give strategies that are vague, or lacking in specificity. Second, they are more likely to appeal to an authority on items where one would expect children to have the resources to cope. Third, more of their responses are coded as "other," that is, as impossible to categorize because it wasn't clear what strategy the child was suggesting.

Our inspection of the content of children's ideas suggest that unpopular and popular differ in the types of strategies they suggest for different social situations. Next we asked whether there is a general framework than could organize our results across situations. As a preliminary step we had independent judges rate each category of response on three dimensions: Assertiveness, Relationship Enhancement, and Effectiveness. An assertive response was defined as one which tends to be more active than passive and usually involves self-initiative. An assertive response can be either pro-social or antisocial. A relationship enhancing response was defined as one which is likely to maintain or enhance a positive relationship between the two children or the child and the group. An effective response was defined as one which is responsive to the requirements of the situation and is likely to solve the explicit or implied problem.

Children were assigned scores for each scale based on the rating given to each of their responses. Results indicated that popular and unpopular children did not differ in assertiveness. Both groups were rated as rather assertive. On the other hand, popular children's responses were rated as significantly more relationship enhancing and as significantly more effective. Thus we have evidence here that children of high- versus low-sociometric status differ in the skillfulness of their strategies: unpopular children's ideas are both less effective in solving the problem at hand and less likely to build successful interpersonal relationships with other children.

The assessment of children's social strategies using this procedure has important implications for social skill training programs. First, the children's responses provide us with insight into the social strategies that are viewed as appropriate by children. By incorporating the strategies which are judged as socially competent into social skill training programs, we hope to be able to stay close to the child's perspective on social interaction, and to meet the principle that skills taught to children should correlate with a known criterion of social competence. Second, this procedure enables us to consider the variety of social contexts in which children interact, and to determine the types of social strategies that are effective in each of these contexts. A question for future research is whether training children in the context of specific situations would add to the effectiveness of general concept training as employed in the Oden and Asher coaching research.

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Table 1

Four Week Test-Retest Correlations

for Rating and Nomination Sociometric Measures

| | Rating | Nomination |
|---|---|---|
| University Preschool | .81** | .56* |
| Community Preschool | .74* | .38 |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

From Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, and Hymel, in press.

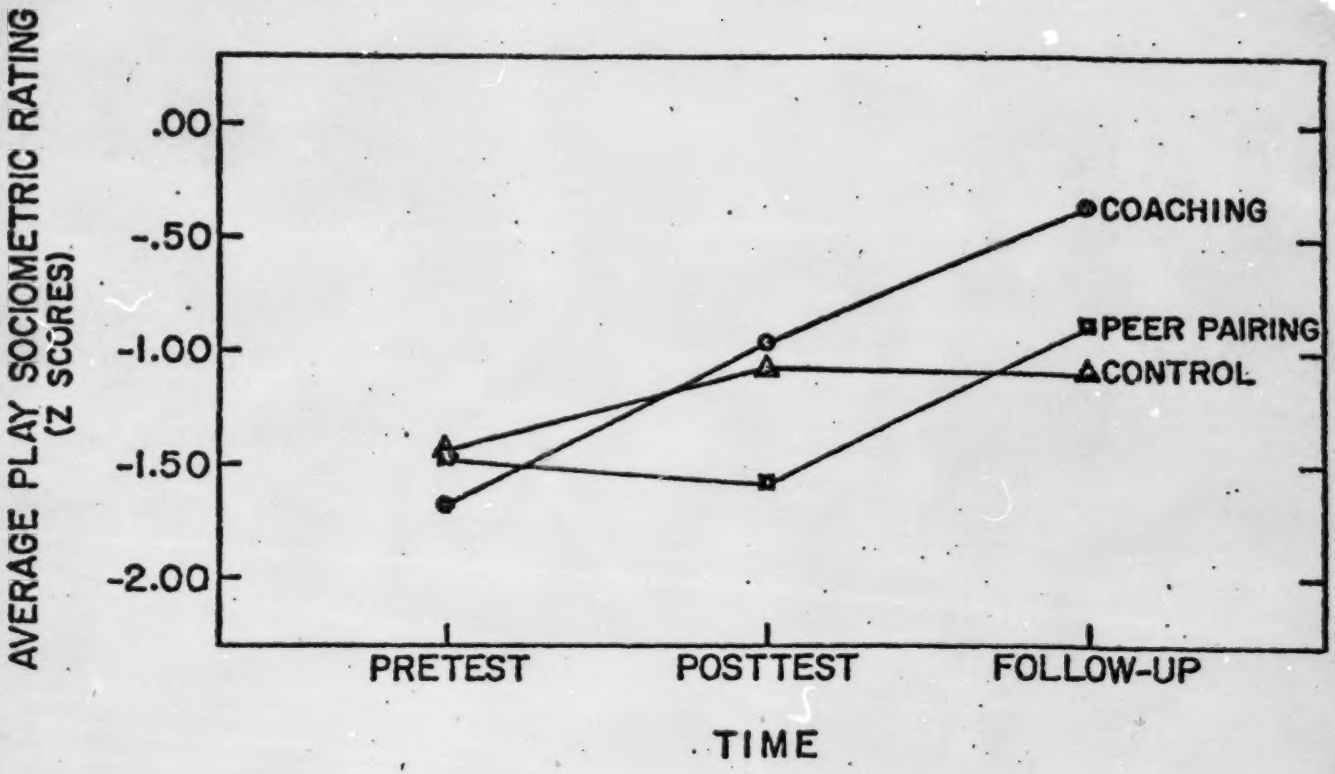


Fig. 1.-Average play sociometric ratings for groups across time

From Oden and Asher (1977)

Here is a girl who has just come to a new school. This is her very first day at her new school.

What could she do to get to know the other children in the class?

Figure 2

Another girl wants to play with the toy and she tries to take it away.

What could this girl do?

Figure 3

These children are talking to each other. This girl says, "I got a new puppy yesterday."

What could this girl say?

Figure 4